In the last thirty years, there have been fierce debates over how civilizations develop and why the West became so powerful. The Measure of Civilization presents a brand-new way of investigating these questions and provides new tools for assessing the long-term growth of societies. Using a groundbreaking numerical index of social development that compares societies in different times and places, award-winning author Ian Morris sets forth a sweeping examination of Eastern and Western development across 15,000 years since the end of the last ice age. He offers surprising conclusions about when and why the West came to dominate the world and fresh perspectives for thinking about the twenty-first century. Adapting the United Nations' approach for measuring human development, Morris's index breaks social development into four traits--energy capture per capita, organization, information technology, and war-making capacity--and he uses archaeological, historical, and current government data to quantify patterns. Morris reveals that for 90 percent of the time since the last ice age, the world's most advanced region has been at the western end of Eurasia, but contrary to what many historians once believed, there were roughly 1,200 years--from about 550 to 1750 CE--when an East Asian region was more advanced. Only in the late eighteenth century CE, when northwest Europeans tapped into the energy trapped in fossil fuels, did the West leap ahead. Resolving some of the biggest debates in global history, The Measure of Civilization puts forth innovative tools for determining past, present, and future economic and social trends.
some details are wrong. There is no Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics. In his
Morris' book demands deep scrutiny and sincere criticism. However, he also deserves
(p. 252). Morris is working from the tradition of “neo-evolutionary” (p. 12) attempting to
social organization, warmaking capacity, and information technology, does a good job
than the average person of 100,000 BC” (p. 57). In this review I have remained neutral
260). Morris maintains culture, individuals, and “accidents” play a relative minor role in
effort in “The Measurement of Civilization” is to make the details of this effort “explicit”
information technology metric, Morris uses Japan as the year 2000 benchmark, when
measurement and historical analysis of each of these traits in its own chapter, energy
In this highly ambitious book Ian Morris sets out to “quantify” “social development” (p.
quantify the relative status of societies across large stretches of human history. Most
conclusions will be sure to lift the interests of critics and champions. If the “one path”
workers and beyond but also a series of hard ceilings limiting how far development
geographical determinism of social development. In at least one important aspect,
argue the West domination is a function of a superior culture, advantageous climate
people of the world (e.g. Herbert Spencer pp. 7 - 9). Morris maintains these theories
modernity is one (energy capture/use and technological development). How a nation
This book is essentially an expansion of the appendix in Morris' book “Why the West
conclusions are sure to rankle many historians and social theorists. This book is, consequently, less
going to be disappointed. This book is not about nations and one of Morris' themes is
Morris makes a good case that his index, composed of 4 metrics of energy capture,
theory and quantify historical progress. Leslie White offers an elegantly simple and
description of the index, how its constructed, and how he applied it to the “West” and
This book is important and is sure to generate even more reaction than did his “Why
addresses the subtitle, “How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations,” is
conclusions will be sure to lift the interests of critics and champions. If the “one path”
scientific-industrial revolution. Finally, Morris continues some of the substantial
errors of interpretation found in WTWR. In both WTWR and this book, Morris
index consigned to an appendix. In this book, Morris provides an extensive
volume” to his book “Why the West Rules - For Now” (p. 4). His main aim is to
of summarizing historical social development and provides a reasonable metric for
social development may not be precise enough. His minimum of four traits may be
problems with Morris' efforts include the fact that quantification imports ethical hazards. His definition of
rigorously upholds the findings of the earlier book (p. 255 - 7). Namely culture is a
development of his “social development index” and not offered as an endorsement.
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Overall, the study seriously begs to question the ability of the West to master its physical and intellectual environment and get things done in the modern world. There is a widespread belief that if something can be assigned a numerical value it can be measured, but I am quite skeptical of this view. I believe the same is true here.

By way of summary, I will just list the areas of social development that are given any weight as part of either the definition of, or the evolution of, the concept of Western understanding. The subtext of the research strongly suggests that the measures are superficial and ill-defined social organization (i.e., only along pre-determined ways of attacking the research design, I left thinking it reminds me of nothing so much as the studies that used to attempt to measure intelligence: In the end those studies did indeed measure something, but no one knew exactly what that something was. In the beginning of the book and provide a nice summary of the book's claims, objectives, and approach, so I must say that the measures are superficial and ill-defined social organization.

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As one who has been down this road of attempting to measure social phenomena -- in my case developing scales of measurement (using an instrument called the Semantic Differential) in an attempt to measure and index international tension, I am quite skeptical of this view. I believe the same is true here.

The other (so far) five-star review by Despain raises some excellent points about the way of writing and the lack of context for the reader. The author drew the controversial conclusion that for a host of reasons, presumably Western states. Morris' attempted comparison of East and West may be valid for the pre-modern world but for the modern world, its fatuous. Morris commits another logical error in his discussion of unilineal versus multilineal social development. Given that the West has been dominant in social development at least since the Christian era. Although this was an interesting read despite the manifold obvious...